Toby, My Fox-cub

Frances Pitt

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TOBY, MY FOX-CUB

Toby was an impudent little minx

Frontispiece]

TOBY, MY FOX-CUB

Being the Story of Toby, the Pet Vixen, her Upbringing, Pranks and Adventures Told by

FRANCES PITT

AUTHOR OF

"TOM, MY PEACOCK," "MOSES, MY OTTER," "ANIMAL MIND" "WILD LIFE STUDIES," "WATERSIDE CREATURES," "SHETLAND PIRATES," "WOODLAND CREATURES," AND "WILD CREATURES OF GARDEN AND HEDGEROW"

WITH 20 PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

LONDON :: ARROWSMITH :: W.C.1

First published in March, 1929

Printed in Great Britain by
J. W. Arrowsmith Ltd., 11 Quay Street, Bristol

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CHAPTER ONE

THE CUBS

WHEN I first saw the cubs they were tiny blind things, like new-born kittens, and with no suggestion of the fox about them; yet these small, helpless, roly-poly creatures *were* fox-cubs, despite the fact that they had snub noses, dark mousy-brown coats and little rat tails.

No doubt to the old vixen they had been the most lovely of babies, holding promise of all vulpine beauty and exquisite grace. Doubtless to her they had been the most perfect things that could possibly exist. Looking at the wee, helpless mites, I pictured all the trouble she had taken on their behalf. One could imagine her, in the grey twilight of an early spring evening, gliding through the woodlands beneath the bare, red stems of the brier bushes, under the dark holly-trees and the nut bushes with their dangling "lambs'-tails" and tiny red flowers, inspecting rabbit-holes and

ancient fox-earths in her eager hunt for a really good nursery. I remembered the woodland ride whereon I had found a neat footprint, something like that of a small dog, only narrower and showing traces of hair between the toes ; also the numerous rabbit-holes about which I had again found the same footprint ; to say nothing of a decided odour of fox. Yes, Madame Vixen must have sought far and wide for a home for her coming family. Again I pictured her wandering beneath the red-tasselled elms, with the March winds sighing through the tree-tops, and nosing among the pale yellow primroses in her restless search for the perfect nursery. This rabbit-hole might have done, but it was too near a footpath ; that one, properly enlarged, would have been all right, but a badger had been to it and she did not like his smell ; then there was the old fox-earth, beneath an ancient yew-tree, which pleased her mightily—she came back to that the succeeding night and began to dig and delve, drawing forth the red earth and sending it in showers down the steep bank. She scratched and scraped, only leaving her task to meet her mate and join him in a hunt for food. Did they stalk the rabbits feeding in

the moonlight at the edge of the wood? Or did the dog-fox pick up a hen that the farmer's wife had forgotten to shut up? Well, of course I do not know exactly, because I am just "putting two and two together," but there were many stories of missing hens at that time, and I found places where rabbits had been killed and eaten.

Once I saw him, Toby's father, the fine dog-fox that was the sire of the two cubs which came into my hands, of which one, the Toby of this story, was the most mischievous little imp that ever ran on four legs.

But that will all be dealt with later: it is of Toby's parents I would write now, especially that splendid dog-fox as he stood among the dead spring bracken, the afternoon sun glowing on his red coat, his slender muzzle raised, his ears pricked and his magnificent brush, with its two inches of white tag, straight behind him. So he posed for an instant, one neat black foot held up, and then, with a whisk of that brush, turned and vanished.

I do not doubt that, like all dog-foxes, he was a model husband. I found his big footprint close to that of the vixen, especially about the fox-earth

beneath the yew-tree. That he helped her with the digging there can be no question, and the old burrow was speedily opened up and enlarged, the heap of soil before the main entrance growing daily, or rather nightly. It told more eloquently than words of the underground preparations, and the snug home that was coming into being.

The March days passed, the violets were like stars on the hedge banks, the primroses were sheets of yellow on the rough ground near the wood, the blackthorn bushes were as white as snowdrifts, and the larches were breaking into tassels of green when Madame Vixen changed her mind and left that well-prepared home.

Why she did so goodness only knows! Something displeased her, something upset her! She fancied some danger, fancied some person or animal had been near, and she went. Whether her mate had any say in the matter I know not, but should hardly think so. He probably had to follow whither she led! And she led the way to dire danger.

It was a drain, a thing of pipes that she chose for the new home (perhaps because there was now so little time in which to get ready a nice hole

of her own), one, moreover, some way from the first earth and in dangerous territory, for it was a spot where pheasants were preferred to foxes.

For a few days all went well; after all, it was a snug place, quite dry and comfortable for the tiny cubs, whose feeble, new-born, squeaking voices could not penetrate far down the lengthy tunnel. They lay there in the warm gloom, in the stuffy atmosphere which is an old fox's idea of the right thing for babies, and the vixen cuddled them to her as only a mother can. She lay with them in the foxy-smelling darkness in the perfect bliss of the happy mother, the wee things seeking the warm comfort of her furry side, nosing her with blunt muzzles and padding her flanks with little feet.

Then came disaster.

Of that tragedy the least said the better. Let it suffice to mention I saved the lives of two cubs, but four cubs and their mother had gone where all creatures must go sooner or later.

Perhaps it was as well for me I could not rescue the others! They were not more than two days old, and, as I said in the opening sentence of this story, very small, blind and perfectly helpless.

With their snub noses, blunt muzzles, their short, woolly, dark coats, little rat tails, no longer than my little finger, and small ears flat to their heads, they could only be compared to very very young kittens. No one could have seen any hint of the elegant beauty of a fox about them. Their eyes were sealed, their lips hid toothless gums and they whimpered piteously in the most appealing, helpless way. No creatures more hopelessly incapable of doing anything for themselves have I ever seen ; they were the most babyish of babies, and therefore all the more fascinating to one who was never able to resist helpless baby creatures.

Yet when the little things snuggled down into the warmth of my hands, the one wriggling under the other, I did wonder if I was not laying up future trouble for myself, but I am sure I did not realize how much ! If it had been possible to foresee all the worry and trouble those two small cubs were going to be, would I have had the pluck to tackle the job of rearing them, or rather of bringing up Toby ? Well, I do not know, but I am quite sure that no one could have resisted them, or done otherwise than try to rear them.

The bringing-up of baby wild animals is always

The bringing up of baby wild animals is always difficult

difficult, unless one can obtain a foster-mother, for, try as one will, one is but a poor substitute for the lost mother. In my case, no cat with kittens or other foster-mother being available, I had to do the best I could. The best in this instance took the shape of a fountain-pen filler and some milk, the latter being the richest and newest cow's milk to be had.

Though so small and young, the two wee things had already decided opinions of their own, being obstinately convinced that the rubber pen filler was not meant to be sucked. Their first lesson in life had been that of snuggling up to a warm motherly furry flank, where lovely milk was to be had—even in two short days the lesson had been firmly implanted in the shadowy dimness of their as yet scarcely comprehending minds. It was amazing with what sturdy persistence they refused the substitute. The bigger one, the future Toby, was most determined—she would not suck it! And she did not! At least not for some hours.

By the way, Toby, who had already acquired this name, was much the sturdier of the two, being plumper and more portly than her brother. He was at once dubbed "Jack," why I do not know,

except that he had got to have a name of some sort. Now Jack, despite the fact that the grown-up dog-fox is usually much bigger than his lady, was not as lusty a cub as little Toby. He seemed the more fretful of the two, squeaking and whimpering and trying to creep under his sister. But perhaps that was merely because boys always demand and get more attention than girls! In other respects there was little difference between them, both having white tips to those ridiculous little rat tails that foreshadowed the handsome brushes they would have when grown up.

Such were the two baby foxes as they lay in the blanket-lined basket my mother had provided as their nursery, and we all inspected them and speculated as to their future. My father and brother made severe remarks, saying the cubs would never survive, but I replied it would not be for want of trying on my part—I was going to save them if I could, and to emphasize this went on doing my best to induce Toby to take some milk—she still refused, with that confirmed obstinacy that only little helpless things like this can achieve. She squeaked and Jack whimpered, and a certain elderly lady, otherwise Biddy the old fox-terrier,

heard their voices and came to see what manner of creatures these were. She pricked her ears and listened to the small babyish sounds, she even stood up on her hind legs, put her paws on the edge of the basket and gazed over its edge at the babies lying on the blanket within. Amazed curiosity was written on her face, not to say surprise and displeasure. This elderly spinster had never had anything to do with puppies, let alone cubs, and here was something strangely puppy-like brought into her domain. Worse still, here were all her people, her particular friends, standing around the new-comers and giving them serious attention.

Biddy gazed and sniffed, cast a jealous glance at us all, and with a disgusted growl dropped down, tucked her tail between her legs and retreated to the fire-place. *She* was not going to have anything to do with fox-cubs! In extenuation, it must be said that she was a real fox-terrier, whose parents, grand-parents and great-grand-parents had all been accustomed to going to ground and bolting foxes from their strongholds. But I do not think this had anything to do with it. No, she was just an old maiden lady horribly upset at finding children about the place, very jealous,

much annoyed, and as angry as anyone is justified in being when the old home is invaded by new-comers.

There she sat by the fire, as near to it as she could get, a perfect picture of " the nose-out-of-joint," and the more the cubs cried the more digusted she became.

Meantime I had been busy, getting a hot-water bottle for the little things to cuddle up to, and more warm milk for a final endeavour to get them to take some food. Once again the pen filler was thrust between Toby's toothless but clenched jaws, and at long last she swallowed some milk. The first drop was an accident, but in a moment or two she was sucking properly. As for Jack, he was not nearly so contrary as his sister, and soon found out where milk could be obtained. He took about a teaspoonful, and when Toby had taken the same I put them to bed against the hot-water bottle, tucking them up with the blanket, and waiting as anxiously as any real mother to know if they would " go down " all right. They whimpered softly for a moment, then, full of milk and soothed by the warmth of the hot-water bottle, the orphaned mites went quietly to sleep.

I had won the first round, but there were many more to come ! And it was with some inkling of what they would be like that I murmured to myself that, after all, it was perhaps providential the rescued cubs had been but two—just think what it would have meant to battle with six obstinate mites !

CHAPTER TWO

TOBY AND JACK

FOR those who attempt to rear young wild animals by hand it is trouble, trouble all the time, by day and night, and in the early morning too! At least such was my opinion after twenty-four hours spent in taking care of Toby and Jack and trying to play the part of substitute for their mother.

Yes, as hinted in the first chapter, they had been named at once. Someone looked at the little vixen and murmured "Toby," declaring she was just like Mr. Punch's famous Toby-dog. As she had *not* got a frill round her neck, this was a libellous remark, but it must be admitted her snub-nose had something about it reminiscent of the drawing of Toby on the cover of *Punch*.

"Well, she won't look like it very long!" I replied, hastening to add, "that is if all goes well and we rear the two of them."

The IF was a necessary one, because they were tiresome babies, tiresome in many ways, so tiresome indeed that this self-imposed nurse rued the day when she so rashly undertook the job of caring for them.

To begin with, I gave them a teaspoonful of milk each every two hours, their last feed being about 9.30 in the evening, after which I thought they should sleep until morning. Between what I thought and hoped and what was really going to happen there turned out to be a wide gap — they did *not* sleep the night through !

With a view to saving trouble in the early morning, I had taken the fox-cubs upstairs with me, carrying them in their basket to my bedroom, and placing them in a corner of the room.

The cubs had been fed, the hot-water bottle had been freshly filled, and the motherless mites lay comfortably against it. I took a last look at them before blowing my candle out. The poor little things lay sound asleep, cuddled close together, and only the regular movements of their flanks told all was well. Very gently I tucked the wrapper about them, closed the lid of the basket, and crept into bed.

Long ages, an eternity later, I came to myself with a start—what was that? A squeak, a wee whimpering voice crying in the darkness, in fact two pitiful whimpers accompanied by a scratching sound—what could it be? Why, the fox-cubs, of course! Toby and Jack were awake and wanted attention, but I said to myself that if I left them alone *they* would soon go to sleep again. Had they been at home in the earth the old vixen could not have stayed with them all night, for she would have had to go out and hunt. The mother-fox lies with her cubs for two or three days after they are born, during which time the dog-fox brings her food, but she soon goes out hunting on her own account. While later, instead of lying with the cubs, she leaves them in the nursery and merely stays near, where she can keep an eye upon them.

With all this in my mind, also the thought that even the most spoilt of human babies has to learn to "go until morning," I turned over and tried to go to sleep again. But this was reckoning without Toby and Jack. They were not going to sleep, nor were they going to allow me to doze off. Whine, whimper, squeak; whine, whimper,

squeak; each in turn, and then as a duet, they kept it up with a steady persistence that was amazing and exasperating. Far away, in the silent house, came the muffled tones of a clock, "one —two—three." Without my window an owl hooted, and another replied, sounding like a pixy shrieking derisively in the night, and laughing at the woes of this silly woman, who would try and play the part of nurse to two babies from the wild.

Still the fox-cubs cried, whimpering pathetically, and I could hear little scratching noises as they wriggled and tumbled about in their bed. Common sense said that they were all right, that they had got to learn to sleep the night through, that one must begin as one meant to go on, and the best thing was to put the bedclothes over my head and go to sleep, when Toby and Jack would soon tire themselves out and go to sleep too.

But common sense at three o'clock in the morning, with two little cubs crying so unhappily, could not make itself obeyed. The whimper of one cub rose to a desperate shriek, at which I rose and struck a match, shiveringly pulled on a dressing-gown, and opened the basket. The

little blind kitten-like creatures were scrambling feebly about, nosing and pushing here and there in the folds of the blanket, and crying piteously the while. The hot-water bottle, though not stone cold, had lost a great deal of its heat, and looking at my watch, which pointed to 3.10, I reluctantly decided to go downstairs, light the primus stove, boil some water for the bottle, and warm some milk. So much for the joys of bringing up fox-cubs by hand, said I to myself, as I went through the dark cold house and found what was needed; but half an hour later, when each cub in turn sucked its allowance of milk, pulling so willingly and greedily (how different from their behaviour of a few hours before!), and then cuddled contentedly up to the newly-filled hot-water bottle, I could not harbour any grievance, for they were such fascinating mites.

The cubs sank into slumber, and so did I, it being daylight ere their voices roused me to a fresh realization of my responsibilities. Breakfast was served punctually at 5.30 a.m., and the next meal at nine o'clock, followed by an early luncheon at twelve, tea at three o'clock, dinner at six, and supper at 9.30 p.m. In fact, I fed them

at, roughly, three hours' intervals, increasing the quantity of milk slightly to compensate for the extra time. It was, of course, the newest and richest cow's milk I could get, but might with advantage have been still richer, for cow's milk is poor in fats when compared with that of smaller animals. The cow excels with regard to quantity rather than quality, and a small wild animal, such as a fox-cub, has to take about twice as much cow's milk as it would receive milk from its mother to get the same amount of nourishment.

Those of my readers who have read the story of *Moses, My Otter*, will remember that Moses and Aaron were nearly starved because the milk they had was not good enough. The trouble was not so serious in the case of Toby and Jack, but it was there, and anyone who has to bring up little creatures from the wild would do well to be prepared for it, and, if available, try substitutes, such as goat's milk.

Nothing of the kind being at hand, Toby, Jack and I had to carry on ; and the cubs certainly did very well, far better than the otters on the same fare. It was a treat to see them taking their food, lying " spread-eagled " on my lap, padding

at my hands with their funny little feet (just like kittens padding the old cat's side) and sucking as hard as they could. They were soon promoted from the glass tube to a baby's bottle, for the former did not hold enough to cope with their rapidly increasing appetites. They grew amazingly, and their appetites increased proportionately. Ten days after I took them in hand they had altered out of all recognition, though still blind and with nothing foxy in their appearance; but whereas, to begin with, they had been kittens, they were now puppies. They had developed nice fluffy coats, and their little ears that had formerly lain flat against their heads, now pricked forward. Yes, at this stage they looked like little grey-brown fluffy blind puppies. If my estimate of their age was right, *i.e.* twenty-four hours old when they came into my hands, the cubs did not begin to open their eyes until twelve days old, and Toby could not see properly before her seventeenth day.

But this is getting on rather too fast, and I must go back to the point where Jack and Toby had been promoted to a baby's bottle, from which they took bigger meals, but at longer intervals, namely of four hours. Also, being convinced

I must bring up the children in the way they should go, I did not again have them in my room at night, but put their basket in a hot-air cupboard, where they were very snug and warm, and soon learnt it was no good crying in the night. I tucked them up in a flannelette wrapper, with their hot-water bottle to keep them cosy, and put them to bed about ten o'clock, going to them again first thing in the morning, when they crawled out of their bedding to meet me, hungry, healthy and happy.

Herewith a word of warning to those who may try likewise to rear very young cubs. The first bedding I used was an old blanket, but its rather rough flannel was too rough for their tender little feet, which became quite sore, so two large pieces of very soft flannelette were obtained, and used alternately, when there was no further trouble of that kind. I say "used alternately," because one had to take as much trouble to keep the little creatures clean as one would have done in the case of a human baby, and one piece of bedding went to "the tub" while the other was in use.

And so things went on, the cubs doing well,

until April 18th, when according to my calculations they were fifteen days old. Each had then one eye half open, and they had become roly-poly comfortable little people. Unfortunately, I became obsessed by an idea I was coddling them too much. Under natural conditions, I argued, that is in an earth under their mother's care, they would not get any extra heat. They would not have a hot-water bottle to cuddle against, and at two weeks old the vixen would certainly not be lying with them. Moreover, they would not sleep in a place heated by a boiler, as was the case with the little room or "hot-air cupboard" to which they nightly retired. Although, despite the fact they were quite well, I got very uneasy, and finally put them to bed without the hot-water bottle. It was not healthy for them to be so warm, I said. Alas! the next day Jack did not seem very lively, and in the afternoon turned his little snub nose away from the bottle. He refused to suck, and seemed listless. His little nose was dry, instead of soft and damp. Had he caught a chill? Was he ill? I fetched that wretched hot-water bottle, and he crept up to it, and lay suspiciously quiet beside it.

The following morning it was the same. He looked all right, but would not take any food, and only wanted to lie quiet against the hot-water bottle. The warmer it was the closer he cuddled to it. I was very " put-out-of-the-way " and feared the worst, blaming myself for ever having taken the bottle away.

The next day, in the grey dawn, I found him curled up as if asleep against the bottle, but it was a sleep from which there was no awakening.

* * * * *

Never so long as she chose to lie by a hot-water bottle was Toby deprived of it.

CHAPTER THREE

TOBY PROGRESSES

SO Toby was left alone, and was completely and thoroughly spoilt. Everything she might want I supplied to the best of my ability. As for that wretched hot-water bottle, she had to have that, and, what is more, it had to be frequently refilled. How she cuddled up to it. The warmer it was the nearer she got to it, even lying "spread-eagled" on the top of it. In the absence of a brother to lie with, she must toast herself upon the bottle.

I cannot say that she grieved or fretted for Jack, being much too young to realize her loss or that her brother had mysteriously disappeared. Even now she was but a small cub, though one that grew amazingly fast, altering and developing every day. Each morning her blue-grey eyes, which at first had regarded the world with the unseeing, uncomprehending stare of the

One could now see indications of the future fox

very baby creature, grew brighter and more inquisitive, taking in her surroundings and the people about her. One could now see indications of the future fox. Her face was getting sharper, her ears more pricked and her tail longer. It was a "tail" still, by no stretch of the imagination could it be dubbed a brush, for it was about the size and thickness of that of a well-grown old rat; however, it bore a white tip, quite a pencil of white hair, to foretell the handsome tag which would be Toby's lot some future day.

By the way, people think it is only the dog-fox which wears a white tag at the end of his brush; but this is not so, some dog-foxes have quite plain brushes, and some vixens have beautiful tags. It was obvious Toby would be one of these.

Her coat had also improved, being now thick, soft and fluffy, but it was still grey-brown in hue, save about the face, where she had become more sandy in colour. To crown all, she had an engaging expression of confiding mischievousness that made her a most lovable little creature. She was full of life and kittenish high spirits, and

delighted to pounce upon my fingers, biting at them with her toothless gums, or rather with jaws in which tiny pin-points could just be felt, for Toby was getting her teeth.

She was like a small puppy, at the same age, ready to chew anything, and, as I have said, prepared to practise on my fingers, pretending to worry my hand, ere rolling on her back and kicking all her four legs in the air.

There could be no doubt she was doing very well, but after the disaster with Jack I watched her and worried over her with quite needless anxiety. Once she had got her teeth and could eat I felt all would be well, but in the meantime I feared lest anything should go wrong with her.

The cub had, of course, long since been promoted from the basket that was the early sleeping-place to more roomy quarters. There was a small, empty room that served as a day nursery, which I furnished with an old tea-chest, turning it on its side, and placing therein her hot-water bottle and the flannelette wrapper that served her as a blanket. A tray of sand was used for sanitary purposes, and I must here mention

that throughout the time this young fox lived in the house she was not only perfectly clean in her habits, but quite without odour. She had no foxy smell. Perhaps if she had stayed long enough with us this might have developed, but in the meantime, and despite the fact that she was kept indoors most of her time, Toby was as inoffensive as any dog or cat. I have known many a dog that was far more smelly. As she was fed naturally, i.e. on rabbit meat, it was not a question of diet.

But to mention rabbit meat is getting on too fast, for Tony had not begun to eat at the point where I digressed to tell of her nursery arrangements. She could lap milk from a saucer, which saved a good deal of trouble, but much preferred to take it from the bottle, at which she sucked with great heartiness, having it four times a day.

Convinced as I was that with the advent of her first teeth she could tackle solid fare, I lost no time in getting rabbit meat for her, which was what the mother vixen would have provided for her little ones, but, to my surprise, Toby showed no understanding of what it was or

any wish to taste it. She did not want the strange, unfamiliar stuff (I was offering her nice little bits of flesh without bone or fur), all she wished for was to suck her beloved bottle of warm milk! Again and again I put the meat before her, again and again she turned her snub nose away, even shaking her determined little head, as if to say, "I don't want the nasty stuff!"

I was surprised and rather worried, for surely she ought to begin to eat now? Besides, I had not expected any trouble at this stage in her history, thinking all cubs took to eating meat as ducks take to water, i.e. instinctively and without hesitation. Once again I offered her some rabbit, but this time it was a piece of meat with the fur attached. Still she showed no interest in it, and was turning away, when her nose accidentally touched the fur. Oh! what an amazing change! She turned about and grabbed the food, growling —my Toby, who never in her short life had growled before!—like a little fury, shaking and worrying her booty in the most amazing manner.

One touch of the soft rabbit fur upon her

nose had done what my endless placings of the meat before her had failed to do, it had pulled the trigger of instinct, and had awakened the impulse to seize, worry and eat. Though Toby had had no understanding whatever of rabbit meat, the touch of soft fur had awakened a whole series of inherited impulses. I do not suppose she realized what she was doing, but expect she acted without thought, because it is more than questionable if any young animal, when it acts like this, knows what it is about; but every movement was an experience, she was learning with every mouthful of meat that she chewed, and henceforward was only too glad to get solid food and eat any quantity of rabbit flesh.

From that moment she went ahead even faster than she had done before. I did not let her have too much meat to begin with, for fear of upsetting her, but she flourished on it, there were no bad consequences, and her meat ration was increased. At first she only had joints from young rabbits, but it seemed that the meat of old ones suited her best, their rather tough limbs taking more chewing and sucking and giving her

more to do, which kept her occupied and was good for her little teeth.

These were now needle-points of ivory, uncommonly sharp when she indulged in a game of "make-believe," and pretended my fingers were another fox-cub, to be pounced upon, worried and played with, until little Toby was too tired to go on romping any longer, and curled herself up on my lap and went to sleep.

Even at this early age — I am writing of the time when she was but six weeks old — she began to show her preference for my mother and give her a special greeting. Seeing all I had done for the cub, the time and care I had devoted to her, I thought her an ungrateful little imp to show such pleasure when someone else appeared; but there it was, a most unmistakable demonstration especially reserved for my mother!

When my mother came into the room where the cub was, or I took Toby downstairs, she would go to her, her mouth open in a wide grin, smell my mother's hand and make a strange hissing noise, after which she scampered round

and round, her ears laid flat to her head, and still grinning as if wild with delight.

By the time she was seven weeks old Toby was strong upon her legs, and could gallop well, though liable to roll head over heels now and again. But what was a tumble or two to a little, active, puppy creature bubbling over with life and high spirits? For instance, she would attack my toes, bite my shoes as hard as she could, climb on to my knees, tumble off again, with, oh! such a thump, pick herself up, charge at a cushion on the floor, stalk a match-box, run after a ball, and play and play until tired out, like the most delightful mixture of a roly-poly puppy and a mischievous, fluffy kitten.

On May 21st, when Toby would be seven weeks old, I jotted the following down in a note-book :—

"Toby is getting more fox-like, proper foxy hairs are coming through her woolly puppy jacket, and all her fox markings show distinctly, her face being quite yellow, while amber lights are appearing in her grey eyes. Her full set of first teeth are through, and are very sharp, though she is wonderfully gentle with them considering

how madly she romps. Her playfulness is amazing, and she is so confiding. To see her hopping and skipping about is delightful. She dances all the time. She seems to think it great fun to pretend to worry one's hand or arm; but if she cannot have me to play with a toy will do instead, such as an old stocking, a shoe, or something of the kind.

"As she can lap so well I have at last stopped giving her milk from the bottle, and she has to be content with the saucer. I notice she has a marked preference for the cream that clots round the edges. The pampered pet still has her hot-water bottle—I simply dare not take it away from her!"

From the above it will be realized that the older the cub grew the more she was pampered and spoilt. I racked my brains to think of things she might need, and she was fed on the best of everything. Rabbits were especially shot for her, and it was on rabbit meat that she chiefly subsisted.

Now, as Toby was an intelligent, brainy little imp, it was interesting to see an inherited trait come out in her character. Foxes are in the

habit of burying extra food that they cannot eat at the moment. Many a partly-eaten hen have I found interred in a mole-hill or other patch of soft ground, with, perhaps, a leg or wing feather left sticking out to betray the *cache*. But Toby, well fed from her earliest days, could have had no knowledge of what being short of food meant, yet one day I caught her burying a superfluous leg of rabbit. She had more than she could eat, and she took the extra piece to her sleeping-place, where she scratched among the blankets in the corner of the box, as if digging a hole, then shoved her treasure into the corner, where she pushed and poked with her nose, going through all the movements of pushing earth back over the hole! Then she turned away with a satisfied air, as if sure her bone was safely buried. And this was all done without practice, just because she had the feeling that uneaten food must be hidden.

Next time she managed better, taking the remains of her dinner to the sand on the tray, where she could inter it properly, and, what is more, she buried it therein, as neatly and cleverly as any old, wild fox carrying off a hen under the

light of the moon to hide it somewhere in the depths of the wild woods.

It seemed that Toby could be thoughtful and business-like when she liked.

CHAPTER FOUR

AN IMP OF MISCHIEF

AS Toby grew bigger and stronger, she also grew more adventurous and mischievous, running about the house, upstairs and down, into the bedrooms and sitting-rooms, to play around with anyone who would act as playfellow, or by herself if she could not get attention.

One morning, when I was busy writing, too busy to pay any attention to a fox-cub, despite the fact that she tugged at my skirt and pounced on my toes, she turned away, regarded me from a distance, took a running leap and landed on my knee. Firmly, though gently, I put her down, at which she showed every symptom of coming back, but a handy cushion flung in the cub's direction distracted her attention. She stalked it as if it were a live creature, sprang upon it, and then began to dance on the soft, yielding thing. With arched back and all four feet close

together, like a buck-jumping horse, she bounced up and down, keeping up the performance for five minutes or more. If I had distracted her attention, she had equally and effectually distracted mine ! Who could go on writing when a fox-cub wanted to play. But at last she went off and left me in peace, quietness reigning for a while.

Now, when Toby was quiet, only one thing was certain, namely that she was in mischief. This occasion was no exception to the rule. Someone had left my father's dressing-room door open, and she was among his boots. She doted on my father's boots, or rather the laces in them. I do not mean that she showed any especially appreciation of the fact that my father was rather particular about his foot-wear and had a great number of pairs of boots ; but merely that she liked boot-laces, chewing them with gusto. Nor did she tire of this leathery fare, though often sick of it in another sense, for even best porpoise hide laces are indigestible, and apt to make a fox-cub bilious.

I went on writing for a while, until Toby came quietly back, so quietly that her advent

The inquiring stage of life

aroused my attention and suspicions. "Toby, what have you been up to?" I exclaimed, as she crept to my feet, not ashamed, but feeling the first pangs of disagreeing bootlaces. No wonder she was ill, she deserved to be, for hardly a lace was left in my father's precious boots! It took twelve pairs to replace those she had eaten, which I had to provide!

An old shoe was a joyful toy for her, being worried and thrown about in a most puppy-like manner, yet, despite the fact that the cub was in many respects like a charming, mischievous puppy, it is not fair to compare her with one, for the fox has much more in common with the cat than the dog. The latter, originally a pack animal, with a craving for a leader and for companionship, always wants society, and has transferred to us the loyalty he originally kept for the pack and pack leader. Now the cat is "the cat that walks by himself," and it is the same with the fox, he "walks by himself," he has never been a pack animal, he has never craved for company, save that of his mate, and he hunts by himself. And this was so with Toby. Charming and attractive as she was, she was a self-contained

little creature, independent, and as disobedient as any spoilt child that ever walked. She had no notion of coming because she was called. If she heard me and wanted something, say a tit-bit, or a good romp, she would race helter-skelter after me, but otherwise I could call her as long as I liked, but she would pay no more attention than if it were the north wind. Spoiling certainly helped to make her naughty, but I feel sure that her disobedience was chiefly due to the absence of any desire to "run with the pack."

As I said before, she was more like a cat in her ways than a dog; yet again I am not sure that even this comparison is fair, for, after all, she was really like nothing else, she was just herself, just a fox, and such a charming one too, her very naughtiness and disobediences making her the more attractive.

But by now she was a fox not only in spirit but in appearance. A sandy-coloured coat had come through her original mousy wool, her muzzle had lengthened and become slender, her eyes had turned from grey to amber, and her ears had grown larger and had become tipped with

Poor old Biddy, the terrier, viewed Toby with suspicion

black. Instead of being a short, stout, waddling little person, she was now long on the leg, and, as I have said, exceedingly active. Only one thing about her remained really cub-like, and that was her brush, it was filling out, but had not yet got thick; nevertheless, she was *a fox!*

Was it this that separated Toby from her fellow-household pets, the dogs and cats? I have mentioned with what suspicion poor old Biddy, the terrier, had viewed the advent of the cub; and it cannot be said that Nettle, the younger terrier, liked her any better. They knew they had got to endure her presence, but they did not enjoy it, nor love her in the least. But then she did nothing to make herself pleasing to them, instead she took the greatest delight in teasing and annoying the two. She would hide round a corner, and wait until one of the dogs came by, suddenly rushing out, springing at the terrier and pretending to bite her. Neither Biddy nor Nettle saw the joke. Biddy, an ancient spinster, was much affronted, and went off, growling, with her tail between her legs; and Nettle did not take it in much better part. She

likewise was a maiden lady, too settled in her ways to indulge in frivolity with fox-cubs, so she snarled, showed her teeth, and made off. But I think it says much for the innate good nature of the two dogs that they only grumbled and never retaliated with a snap or a bite—there was many an occasion when it would have served Toby right if the terriers had punished her for her impudence.

From this it will be gathered that she was not nervous, indeed she did not know what the word fear meant. She was cautious with strangers, but not shy, and seemed quite without the inherent timidity of the wild animal. Nevertheless, I took much care not to startle or alarm her, knowing that a sudden fright might bring to the surface the fearfulness of her species, that innate timidity which is the characteristic of most wild animals and birds found in the civilized portions of the globe, and of which the fox has full measure. This was one of the reasons that I never smacked or punished her, despite the fact she might have been much better for a little wholesome correction —I was too afraid of spoiling her perfect confidence in us all!

Far from being shy with strangers, she was ready, after a cautious inspection, to be friendly, and her manners to visitors were usually charming. Once, and once only, did she lapse from grace. A visitor appeared in the middle of the morning, at a time when both my mother and I were too busy to go and talk politely to a caller. However, it had to be done. We looked at one another and mutely questioned how long the tiresome caller would stay. He sat down as if intending to remain some time, but he left quicker than we expected, jumping up from the arm-chair with a swiftness of movement which was startling, when out from beneath the chair shot Toby fox-cub, bolting out of the room and away upstairs to her own quarters like a flash of sandy-red lightning.

Toby must have been curled up asleep under the chair, and had awakened to see her way to the door barred by a strange pair of legs, when, rather frightened at the predicament, she had given one of the legs a delicate nip and fled the scene. The owner of those legs took them away immediately, and neither my mother nor I could find it in our hearts to be really cross with the cub !

That was Toby's one and only lapse from good manners; she was as reliable as any dog or cat, never snapping or growling or misbehaving herself.

Of course, she used her teeth in play, and sharp little teeth they were, but she was extraordinarily gentle, more so than most puppies, for she never really hurt. She delighted in rushing at me, and pretending to bite me in the leg, or worry my toes, but I cannot remember that she ever tore my stockings, which is more than I could say for other friends of mine. Moses and Aaron Otter spoilt many stockings, Tom Otter was as a cub nearly as bad; Tommy Hyrax often did the same; while as for Diana Muggins, the badger, she loved legs, especially the fleshy part of the calf!

Yes, Toby was a perfect little lady, and, as a rule, behaved like one; but at no time was she more attractive than when just aroused from a nap and too sleepy to rush about. Then she would climb on my knee, roll over on her back, and lie there, yawning widely—exposing a fine view of white teeth and pink tongue—while I stroked and tickled her tummy. She liked being

When she met my mother she always did the same thing, opening her mouth and laying her ears back flat to her head

stroked underneath, and had the neatest and softest of white "waistcoats," so that it was indeed a joy to run one's hand down it.

That the fox loved to be petted there could be no question, but whether she had much affection for me I do not know. I did everything for her, and she certainly regarded me as the source of food and all good things, but she was a self-contained, undemonstrative little person and never fawned upon me. Again, she was more cat-like than dog-like, and, as hinted previously, one could not help but feel that she "walked by herself."

Yet there was an exception to this, one person whom she did greet with every sign of joy and delight. I have already mentioned that as a little cub she had formed the habit of "grinning" at my mother, and this she continued to do, meeting my mother with the widest of smiles. When she met my mother she always did the same thing, opening her mouth, laying her ears back flat to her head, making a hissing noise like steam escaping, and running round wagging her little brush, until my mother petted her or took notice of her!

Up to this time Toby's horizon was a limited one, being circumscribed by the front door and back door. I had not attempted to keep her indoors, but, bold as she was within, her courage failed her when she looked forth into the wide world, and so far she had not ventured out. She romped upstairs and down, from the kitchen to the attics, chased a bouncing ball down the front stairs, caught it in the hall, and raced off up the back stairs with it to her own room; but the outside world was too vast and strange for her, a new timidity seized her when she stood on the doorstep, looked forth into the garden and smelt the thousand and one smells that made up the outside world. Her confidence failed her, and she ran indoors again, nor was it until she was a well-grown cub that she ventured forth.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOBY AND SPITFIRE, TO SAY NOTHING OF OTHER MATTERS

TOBY, as I have said, was an impudent little minx, so engaging, yet so independent and naughty; but her cheeky, assured air vanished when she first adventured forth into the garden. It came back later, and in full force too, but oh! that first trip across the vast expanse of gravelled drive and on to the wide open lawn beyond caused her amber eyes to open wide, while with ears pricked, and sniffing at every step, she tried to take in the strange sights and sounds, to say nothing of scents that came from every side.

Then a cat mewed somewhere in the shrubs, and Toby was gone like a flash, fleeing into the house, away up the stairs, and into her room, where I found her curled up in the innermost corner of her sleeping-box.

The sudden, unexpected sound, amid so much that was strange, had caused her to bolt in panic, and she had " gone to ground."

However, the cub's timidity of the outside world wore off only too quickly. I say it wore off " too quickly," because she soon became very adventurous, and as inquisitive concerning outside things as she had previously been the reverse. Once she had got over her first timidity, and you could not leave the front door open for a moment without her being off to explore the garden, she ran here, there and everywhere.

Now it was that Toby made the acquaintance of Spitfire. Spitfire needs some introduction. He was a very large black-and-white tom cat, of the most ordinary kind, but distinguished by first his size, and last but not least his character. He was an inveterate poacher, but that was not his claim to distinction, which lay in his personality, which was more like that of a dog than a cat. He liked going for walks with us, and thought nothing of going out rabbiting with a ferreting party. He tolerated familiarity from human friends, but not from other cats or strange people. To his own kind, even nice little lady cats, he was a

Oh ! that first trip across the vast expanse of gravelled drive, with ears pricked and sniffing at every step

terrible ruffian. I remember one, such a charming puss, walking up to him unsuspectingly, purring as she did so. Spitfire glared at her, temper in every line of his whiskers and the glance of his green eyes, and hit her on the head with his armed paw, knocking the poor little lady head over heels into the mud!

Again, there is another memory of Spitfire, a prisoner, tied for his sins by a collar and chain to a dog-kennel, and a pitying man gazing at him and saying, "What a shame to tie a cat up like that!" "Me-ow!" answered Spitfire. "Poor puss! Poor pussy!" said the kindly sympathetic stranger, stooping down to stroke, pet and condole with the chained-up sinner.

"Look out!" I cried, seeing from a distance what was taking place; but my warning had come too late, for the man sprang back, blood running down his hand, which was scratched with five long claw marks.

What he said about cats in general, and that black-and-white tom cat in particular, cannot be told here! But he was evidently satisfied that Spitfire was no innocent martyr on a chain.

The cat had been condemned to this chain because he was such a poacher, and it was the only alternative to sending him to the " Happy Hunting Grounds " from which there is no return. We did not allow the cottagers to have cats that wandered all over the woods, and we could not let our own do so. My father said I must keep Spitfire at home, or he would have to go. Then it was that I got the kennel, a smart little leather collar, and a long but light chain, installing Mr. Spitfire under a big fir-tree on the lawn. He had a daily walk, and at night was removed to a large granary, so his lot was not such a bad one, yet I cannot say it made his already peculiar temper any better.

All this about Spitfire, this long introduction of him to the reader, has been necessary to explain why I was much upset one afternoon to discover he had broken his chain and was loose in the garden. Toby was running around, at the moment deeply interested in two workmen who were bringing water to the flower-beds. She followed them, and sat with her head on one side, watching the water pouring from the

cans on to the plants. Then it was that a glimpse of black-and-white running round the corner of the house caused me to cry "The cat has got out!" Beseeching the men to look after the fox, I ran to catch Spitfire. Though Toby was now a lusty young fox I was sure she was no match for this great bully, who had thrashed every cat in the neighbourhood and of whom even the dogs went in awe.

"Puss! Puss!" I called, and Spitfire came back at my call, but not to be caught, for he slipped by me and bounded towards the fox-cub. He would kill her, I thought, and ran harder than ever to try and head him off; but Toby, hearing the noise, left the men and the water-cans and came towards the cat. She galloped straight at him, to the surprise of Spitfire, who stopped short in blank amazement. For a fraction of a second he stared at the red creature coming directly towards him, then his nerves failed and he turned tail and bolted. After him went the fox, as hard as she could go, and away went Spitfire, travelling like lightning. He paused for a moment by the front door to look back, and spit with a noise like a cork flying out of

a soda-water bottle, but Toby was upon him, had nipped him in the flank, and raced him on into the shrubbery, before I could get to them to interfere.

I found a sadly-demoralized and upset cat perched high up in a laurel bush, with an excited fox-cub at its foot, dancing and jumping and trying to reach him. With some difficulty I got hold of puss, when he sat on my shoulder and spat worse than ever, for Toby followed us and kept jumping up, trying to reach him.

The bully had found a master, or rather a mistress, for from that time forward Toby made his life a burden to him. She loved to tease him. Her method was to sit down near his kennel, beyond the reach of his chain, and stare at him! This alone annoyed him, but when she followed it up by pretending to stalk him, and then making rushes at him, his temper was reduced to tatters. He had got over his first panic fear of the fox, but a wholesome respect had taken its place; nevertheless, I lived in fear of a mishap, for Spitfire was no mean foe. If he had once got his great

Toby loved to tease Spitfire

claws into the fox's fur they would have left a dreadful mark. But Toby never gave him the chance. She had exact knowledge of the length of his chain, and if she should venture within its radius, knew how far she must jump back to be safe. She used her knowledge to the utmost, but I must confess whatever Spitfire got it was no more than just retribution for his sins.

When not teasing Spitfire Toby had to be doing something, and she often tried to get Nettle and Biddy to play with her, but the latter was too old for such nonsense, and walked off very stiff and sulkily. The former, though younger, was not much better, seeing little fun in being nipped in the flank by a fox. In fact, the second time Toby tried this method of gaining her attention she turned round and snapped in earnest! So "that was that!" Toby had to look elsewhere for a playfellow. She found me a willing one, for I raced and chased her about, rolled her over and tumbled her about just as one would a jolly puppy; but I believe she liked playing with my mother best of all. Mother used to get a newspaper, roll it up, and

shake it at the fox. This was great fun. Toby jumped, skipped and ran around, tried to grab the paper, missed it, sprang again, got it, and ran off with it, shaking and worrying it as if it were a live thing.

A handkerchief, or better still an old rag, was a great joy, but such playthings were soon the worse for Toby's teeth, which were now a beautiful outfit, and as sharp as needles, yet, as mentioned before, she was careful how she used them upon a playfellow, and one day she carried an egg up to my room without harming it.

The household supply of eggs had been brought in, and the basket containing them put down in the hall. Of course, Toby was soon poking her inquisitive nose into that basket, and one sniff seemed to tell what the contents were (or did she think the eggs were a new kind of ball ?), for she grabbed an egg and ran off up the stairs with it. I ran after her, but she dodged me, and slipped under a bed, from which refuge I dragged her out, still clinging to the precious egg, by the scruff of her neck. She was quite cross as, holding her by the neck with one hand,

I tried to prize the egg from between her jaws with the other. Despite the egg in her mouth, she made the queerest squeaks of protest all the while. She behaved exactly as if I were trying to take a delicious morsel from her, and I think, for all the fact she had never seen an egg before, she *did* regard it as edible. Perhaps it was the smell of hen about the eggs which aroused her to such appreciation of them! All the same, I got the egg away unbroken; but for the future had to take care that the egg-basket was not put where the fox could find it.

Whether the odour of hens had anything to do with her liking for eggs or no, she did not show any especial interest in the poultry themselves. I took her for a walk through the stackyard just to see what she thought of cocks and hens, but she took little notice of them. However, this may have been due to the fact that there were so many strange sights and sounds that she became quite timid and bewildered; moreover, the cocks and hens, to say nothing of the ducks, gave her such an ovation that our course around the farm buildings and back to the stable-yard was like

a royal progress. It was enough to make anything shy, even a young fox! They clucked, they cackled, and the ducks quacked, and all the farmyard world followed us, so that I had to pick the rather frightened Toby up and carry her to the house.

The country people tell a story, a fairy-story it might be dubbed, that when hens are allowed to roost where they please at night, and go to bed up in the trees, the fox gets them down by running round under the tree, holding his brush in his mouth, and waltzing until the fowls are so mesmerized they fly down to him. Now, silly as this tale is, there is just a tiny grain of truth in it, namely, that hens are very inquisitive, so intensely curious that they must go and look at any strange creature of the dog type.

After seeing the way cocks, hens, turkeys and ducks came to look at Toby, and not content with looking and clucking, ran after her, I can well believe they might fly down from roost to get a nearer and better look at a fox under their tree!

Toby, as I have said, was too perturbed to regard the throng as anything but a noisy nuisance,

and just crouched inside my coat (if I had to carry her I always put her under my jacket) until she was put down on the doorstep and could scamper off home.

That the cub regarded the house as home was fully apparent. Though now bold enough, if not too bold, out-of-doors, she always bolted for home if anything startled or upset her, racing round the house, in at the front door and away up the stairs to the little back room of which she had the use. It was to her the equivalent of an earth. Whereas fox-cubs brought up under ordinary conditions would have raced away to take refuge in some big burrow in the woods, this fox ran to the house—the question that worried us was would a time come when she would feel a desire to explore a wider world? Would she begin to want to go to ground in a real hole? Would she want to hunt for herself? In short, would she feel the "call of the wild"? At the moment there was no sign of it. She knew no friends but us, no home but the house, she went where she chose and when she list, and at any hint of trouble ran home for shelter.

Of our Toby fox-cub at this age, when she was growing into a handsome young vixen, I can only say a more completely domesticated household pet never ran in and out of doors; yet the title of the next chapter will be "The Call of the Wild."

CHAPTER SIX

THE CALL OF THE WILD

TOBY, I must repeat, was now a beautiful young fox. The little round grey kitten had long been forgotten, and a smart, long-legged, keen-eared, slender-muzzled, elegant creature had taken its place. How she could gallop! I have seen her race around the house like a flash of golden-red lightning, especially when she did not want to be caught and was running away from me.

She had never been obedient, so one could not say she had grown more disobedient, but certainly she was now completely heedless of commands and calls. The only person she ever listened to was my mother, to whose call she sometimes attended, but that was only when she felt inclined.

It was my mother who sounded the first note of alarm. I had been away for a few days, and on

my return was told, "If you don't do something about Toby she will get lost."

"Why? What has she been doing?" I asked.

It was explained that she had been particularly venturesome, wandering off in a way that suggested she wanted to explore a yet wider world than that of the garden and plantations.

"But she knows no other home, and always comes back when frightened," I objected, though uneasiness smote me, and I wondered if the wild was calling Toby, and if our fox was going to leave us. Of course, we could keep her shut up, or put a collar round her neck and tie her to a kennel; but fancy imprisoning that cheery, light-hearted imp, or worse still that she should be condemned to tug at a chain. No, the idea was dismissed, there should be no melancholy prisoner here; if Toby chose to stay well and good, if she did not she should please herself.

The days went by, and I began to think my mother had been mistaken. Everything went on as before, Toby romped about the garden and was more cheery and amusing than ever. She was developing an inclination to stalk

She wanted to explore

She was now a beautiful young fox

imaginary prey, trembling grass blades and leaves blown by the wind being approached with stealthy steps, and then pounced on as if they were alive. It was very amusing to watch her cat-like approach and the glee with which she made the final pounce. But it was all " make-belief," and no one knew it better than the cub.

However, the situation changed when she switched her attention and activities over to the wild ducks. The so-called " wild " ducks were the tame mallard, of which we had a number upon the pools. They were very tame, also desperately inquisitive. Whenever they saw a strange dog or cat near the water they always swam after it in a quacking throng, like a lot of school-children making remarks at a passing stranger. The dogs they knew did not interest them, it was only strange ones, but Toby was never classed among the four-legged creatures that could be ignored. Presumably they looked upon her as a most peculiar little red dog. At any rate, she drew them like a magnet. One glimpse of her golden-red form would bring them swimming hard up the pool, to assemble opposite the spot where she stood on the bank, bow to one another and quack

loudly. They even came ashore to follow her and waddle up the lawn after her, quacking all the while. Like the cocks and hens, they did not seem to have any idea that a fox was a dangerous animal, but were filled with curiosity concerning her.

At first Toby was rather worried and embarrassed by their attentions, but when she began to turn the tables by stalking them, and then making rushes at them, it was I who was worried. If she should grab a duck there would be trouble, not only for that duck, but for Toby and me. Of course, the ducks could fly, and did so when she rushed at them, winging their way back to the pool, where they quacked harder than ever, as if discussing the situation. But so overpowering was their curiosity, that they soon came back to have another look at her.

Afraid of what might happen, I called the fox, but of course Toby paid no heed, she never did! An attempt to pick her up was equally fruitless, for she just slipped out of my reach and into the bushes; but remembering a certain old tin can, I fetched it, ditto a stick, and getting behind the bush beat the can with the stick. At the discordant sound, so strange and unexpected,

Toby took alarm, which was what I meant her to do, and bolted for home, rushed back to the house, in at the door, and away upstairs. But the ruse was no use a second time! On the next occasion that I tried it she merely ran to me to see what I was doing and where the queer noise came from.

Toby certainly had her wits about her, because though easily startled by anything strange, whether a sight or sound, she was ready, having got over her panic, to investigate it, cautiously at first, more boldly as it proved harmless, and having ascertained that alarm was unnecessary, refused for the future to be upset by it. Hence it was that I had to devise such different things to induce her to go indoors when bedtime was at hand. Food would sometimes lure her in, but even the nicest, freshest bit of rabbit was despised if she had an interesting investigation on hand among the shrubs. She loved beetle and grub-hunting in long grass and beneath the bushes, and would nose about for ages in search of small game of this description, deaf, in the interests of the chase, to everyone and everything.

Despite all this, despite Toby's independent, wilful ways, I did not think we were really going to lose her. We were her only friends, the house was so completely her home, and she seemed so absolutely happy, that I could not bring myself to believe there was a real fear of her running away. In fact, my mother's warning was forgotten. Events showed only too well that my mother had foreseen what would happen better than the rest of us, and that home did not count against the lure of the wild woods.

There came an evening, or rather a late afternoon, when Toby dashed out of the house for a game in the garden. She had slept in her box during the middle of the day, had awakened to jump on to my knee and yawn, stretch and roll thereon, condescendingly allowing me to stroke and tickle her neat under-parts, and then played with a ball for a few minutes. I threw it to her, she pounced upon it, picked it up, flung it in the air, ran after it, caught and shook it, and then, already weary of the toy, scampered off downstairs. She ran into the study, sniffed my mother's toes, jumped on my father's knees and off, and was away again. Out into the garden

she went, full gallop, whisking round the corner of the door as I came down the stairs. I saw her scampering about in the bushes, and from the scuffling noise that ensued knew she was chasing one of the cats, probably Old Puss, Spitfire's mother. At any rate, she was very busy about something! A slight altercation with Spitfire (still, for his sins, doing penance on a chain!) followed; and so I "kept half an eye" on Toby until six o'clock.

Here is an entry from my note-book:—

"It was exactly six o'clock when the fox cantered out of the bushes, looked in at the front door, turned about and ran round the house, disappearing towards the stables. I went after her, but could not see her. I called and called, searching for her and swinging a joint of rabbit. Mother came to help. We hunted and hunted, but Toby could not be found."

She had run away!!

* * * * *

Oh, how we hunted, searched and called, in the deepening twilight of that summer evening. Our fox could not be really gone! She *must*

be somewhere near. Every moment we expected to see a sandy-red shape gliding out of the bushes, but it never came. We sought her far and wide, from the plantations, ponds and outbuildings we extended the search to the meadows and even down to the wood. We looked here, we peered there, but found no sign nor trace of the vanished Toby.

The wild woods had called, she had gone back to the woods from which she had been taken, and the wild had regained its own.

Yet we still hoped. That night the front door stood open, wide open, and within was placed a saucer of new milk, with a piece of fresh rabbit meat beside it. Alas! neither had been touched when I went down in the morning. Fearfully I looked into the cub's room (had Toby stayed with us until she was an old, old fox she would still have been "the cub"), hoping against hope to see something golden-red curled up asleep in her box; but no, all was still and deserted.

We should not have worried so much nor have grieved as much if we had been quite sure she was able to look after herself. What did she

know about the wild world? What did she know of earning a living in the woods? Such were the horrid fears that troubled us, and made us try so hard to get her back.

For ten days or more the doors were left open at night—but nothing came in, not even a burglar! For weeks I roamed the countryside in the hope of meeting the runaway fox. But here, at this point, it can only be said that the twilight of a summer evening had swallowed her, and that Toby had vanished from our ken into the wild woods.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TOBY IN THE WILD WOODS

WHERE *did* Toby go when she ran away? Well, I cannot say for certain, not for an absolute certainty, but, with the help of a fox footprint on a muddy woodland ride, with the help of people who saw a small fox in the early mornings, of, later on, trails in the snow, and other signs, I began to get an idea of where she went, what she did and how she became a wild fox that wandered far across the countryside each night.

So I am going to tell what I *think* was Toby's after story; but the reader must remember that whereas the earlier part of this story was just bare facts, the latter part is largely guessing, based on what I found when searching for her, and what I saw later when taking walks through the woods, combined with all I had learnt

during many years' study of foxes, their ways and habits.

* * * * *

Toby, as we know, was last seen racing off to the plantation, to disappear beneath the bushes. It was, for a fox, a lovely, shadowy, secret place beneath those trees, full of damp nooks and strange, pleasant smells. Rabbits visited it, and even lurked where the branches had fallen and made a heap of rubbish. Toby sniffed here and there, her keen nose picking up their scent, also that of mice, rats, cats, and many other things, which gave her as much amusement and interest as we gain from looking down the columns of the day's newspaper. She came upon the house cat, Old Puss, a tabby lady who did not like her, sniffing where the rabbits had been. Puss stood up, arched her back and spat, but Toby, delighted to tease her, made a little rush—up the bush went Old Puss, spitting harder than ever ! The disturbance came to my ears—have I not mentioned that I heard Toby running cats in the bushes ? Once the cat was up the tree Toby could not reach her.

Madame Moses, my otter, would have gone aloft after puss, but Toby was no climber. She went on, to sniff the spot where the cat had been waiting, and find a very strong smell of rabbit.

Toby sniffed and sniffed, rabbit smell filled her being. It was like the day when, as a wee cub, her nose had touched rabbit fur for the first time—new feelings, new desires were stirring within her.

Something moved beneath the heaped-up branches, and in the same instant Toby sprang! It was her first serious effort to catch anything, and, of course, the rabbit went, bolting through the plantation with the fox in hot pursuit. Away it went for the fence, for its own private hole, which it had made in the wire netting, that netting which had been put up for the express purpose of keeping rabbits out of the garden. Under the netting went the rabbit to race away across the open meadow. Dashing after it came Toby (too inexperienced yet to know that no fox can catch a rabbit in fair chase) to follow through the hole, and leave two or three red hairs on the netting for me to find later on.

Now she was out in the meadow, the rabbit having vanished far across the wide-extending plain of grass, with everything strange about her, and vast new worlds to conquer. With all so new and strange, so full of sights, sounds and smells, is it surprising that she forgot home and friends, and thought of nothing but what was ahead of her? A little blue butterfly fluttered through the evening sunshine, and flitted past her nose—she chased it as a kitten would have done. A bee buzzed in the herbage, and she stalked it with care; but it was a worried bee, with an angry hum, and even her inexperience said "leave it alone."

The shadows lengthened, yet still she wandered on and on, thrilled and enthralled by every little quivering leaf and fluttering insect, and so full of the joy of exploration that "home" was blotted from her mind.

Toby followed a hedgerow, a tall old fence that flung forth long, blackberry streamers into the meadow, and whose damp ditch was alive with teeming life. The fox thrilled in every nerve at each tiny rustle, the high-pitched squeak of a shrew brought her to a stop, and caused

her to pose, one foot held up, ears pricked, amber eyes fixed and muzzle pointing at the spot whence came the sound. It came again, then there was a rustle and the grass stirred, when the vixen sprang, landing like a cat with her forefeet upon the spot. Yes, she had it, she had got the shrew. Pushing her nose between her paws she drew forth the little mouse-like creature, already kicking its last, which represented her first kill.

Alas! poor Toby! her victim was not much use. She dropped it, and smelt it, her neat black nose wrinkling in disgust as she did so. She picked it up, flung it in the air, jumped on the corpse as it fell, threw it away again, smelt it once more and then rolled upon it. She rolled just as a dog will on an evil-smelling thing, and there, the next day, I found the unfortunate shrew, a little flattened wisp of fur on the hedge-side path with fox pad-marks about it.

Toby licked the musky flavour of shrew from her lips (shrews, which are quite different creatures from the real mice, are distasteful to dogs, foxes and cats, on account of their peculiar odour) and went on, a golden-red shadow gliding beneath the fern and brier bushes. She had

now reached the bracken jungle, where tall-growing fern and dog-rose bushes, blushing with dainty pink flowers, made a tangle at the woodside. The green fern rose above her head, its fronds interlaced to make a shady canopy, and she picked her way, her inquisitive, inquiring way, along one of the jungle paths. There were paths here, there and everywhere, the high roads of the little people of the fern, and the fox became more and more entranced with the signs, sounds and smells that filled the damp air.

Rabbits, rabbits on all sides, the very path she was following had been beaten smooth by their furry feet; a rank whiff and a queer hissing sound told of their enemy, the stoat; and then something, rustling, riveted her attention. A creature, and not a very big one, was pushing its way among the grass between the fern stems, an animal that made queer little snuffing and grunting noises, and which paused every now and again to chew a find. Toby could hear it smacking its lips. Whatever it was it was not a pretty feeder! The huntress awoke in the fox, she crouched a little, braced herself, and prepared to pounce.

The unknown little animal came on, and other scuffling noises became apparent; more grunting, and smacking of lips; then the grass stirred just before the fox, and she sprang—oh! poor Toby! It was a hedgehog, and in that instant, as she sprang, the "urchin," to give it the name by which the country-folk know it, had become a ball of prickles. It curled up in time to receive the pounce of the fox, who landed with nose and paws upon its spines. She sprang back quicker than she had pounced, a bead of red blood upon her black nose, but no yelp of pain disturbed the evening air, for it is not the fox habit to cry aloud when hurt. Ruefully she rubbed her nose between her paws, drew back, sat down and watched.

The minutes passed, the hedgehog's spines relaxed, its coat smoothed, it raised its head and looked about it with keen, dark eyes. All was quiet, so it stood up and began to move on, when from out of the fern behind it came a smaller edition of itself, and another and yet another — it was a mother hedgehog and her family. They trotted off down the rabbit "run" and the fox watched them go. *She* was not going

to interfere again with Madame of the prickles. No, she licked her nose, and licked her feet—one pad was quite sore—ere moving on, a much wiser young fox, having learnt the lesson, to look before you leap !

The next morning a seeking, searching person found a hedgehog's bristle on the ground and a speck of blood on a leaf beside it, by which time Toby was far away.

The fox drifted on, along the paths beneath the bracken and under the bushes, into the very wood itself. The western sky was blushing crimson as she did so, the shadows thrown by the trees were growing longer and greyer, and bats began to stir in their holes and dens. In the wood it was already dim and dusk, the tree trunks rising mysteriously to distant, leafy heights like great cathedral columns, supporting a vast and distant roof.

But the dim mystery of the twilight woods held no fears for the young fox. She was at one with it, part of it. It was the call of the woods, the call of the wild, which had drawn her from the only home she had ever known, had lured her by hedgerow and brake into the woodlands.

It was here that her mother once roamed, and her sire, that fine dog-fox, had wooed her. No thought of a mother she had no memory of, nor a father she had never seen, let alone of bygone courtships, disturbed Toby. It was the present that enthralled her, wiping out even the immediate past. Did she so much as think of her snug box, the cosy room, and us, her playmates? I doubt it! The world was too wonderful, too vast, and too enthralling for thoughts of anything but what was around her, from the noisy noctules (the great bats that fly high across the twilight sky) in their hole in the oak tree above her head, squeaking shrill disputes, ere setting out for their evening flight, to shrews squeaking equally shrilly as they chased each other in and out of the moss and fallen leaves that carpeted the woodland floor.

Cock pheasants "ker-kerred!" as they went up to roost, a woodcock, taking an evening flight, passed overhead on bat-like wings, its weird, croaking call coming down through the trees, and an owl hooted from a near-by tree, "Too-hoo! Too-hoo! Hoo-ooo-oo!" rang its challenge, and another replied. "Kerwick!

Ker-wick! Ker-wee!" answered a third, and a fourth, until the woods rang with hooting. Away in the distance rose a muffled roar, as of the sea pounding on a shingly shore—it was but the rooks in their rookery conversing ere settling down for the night. Close at hand a blackcap, a late nester, poured forth an evening hymn of joy, and away in the dingle, down which a stream babbled, a nightingale's voice was raised.

So the summer night closed in, and Toby, the fox-cub, wandered on into the wonderful world of the woods; while we, putting the house-door ajar, set out food and milk for one who was far too happy and enthralled to give us as much as half a thought. Our home was home to her no longer, she had gone to her real home, where her forebears had roamed for countless generations, and where she was at one with the night wind whispering through the oaks and ashes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ADVENTURES IN THE WOODS

THUS Toby wandered through the night, exploring the shadowy woods, and getting farther and farther from home. She followed rabbit " runs " and badger paths, the latter well-used high roads, that led her by devious ways to the woodland brook, a hurrying, bustling stream, that tumbled with many a gurgle over moss-grown stones. Here she cooled a parched tongue, parched with the excitement of her long prowl and the joys of exploring, and, as she lapped the cold water, met one of the important people of the woods.

Something made a noise behind the fox, a sound between a grunt and a snort, and jumping around, the cub saw a grey animal, with black-and-white striped face, standing regarding her. We should only have seen a hint of the creature, but the fox, like many birds and beasts, had

eyes especially suited for night work, and for seeing in a very, very bad light. Toby could see the great grey badger quite clearly, just as she could see the path by which she had come, ditto a rock in mid-stream, and the farther side of the brook. In an instant she had jumped to that stone, and from it across to the other bank. She did not know it, but she was using an old, old crossing-place, one that her father and mother had traversed many a time. Foxes, like most other creatures of the country-side, have their recognized highways, which they follow when on business bent, and these roads lead to crossing-places over the streams and rivers, sometimes stepping-stones, sometimes our bridges, but more often natural bridges, such as fallen trees.

Toby had chanced on such a place, stepping-stones which were not only used by the fox population, but by rabbits, hares, badgers and poaching cats. Where her feet trod (leaving a neat little footprint for me to discover later on, as I likewise found that of Old Brock the badger) generations of foxes had trodden before, to say nothing of all the other woodland creatures.

The fox trotted a yard or two up the bank,

and then turned to look back at the creature which had startled her. She could just discern the badger. He was drinking as she had drunk a moment before, lapping busily from the cold water, and evidently quite uninterested in wandering foxes. Reassured, she went on her way, roaming she knew not whither through the darkness of the night.

Yet the warm-scented summer night, even with light clouds across the moon, was anything but dark to Toby the fox, as she wended her way through the burdock forest at the stream-side, and on through a tangle of briers, thistles, ragwort, and fern to the open meadows beyond. Here the grass was grey with dew, and rabbits hopped to and fro, their white tails bobbing like beacons, save when they sat up to shake their damp feet and lick the water from their fur.

The rabbits took little notice of the fox, who drifted through their feeding ranks as quietly as a shadow. Earlier in the night she might have stalked one of them, but, though somewhat hungry, she had travelled far, and was getting tired, so that the inclination to chase a rabbit was gone. What she really wanted now was to

She left a neat little footprint

curl up somewhere warm and comfortable, tuck her nose under her brush, and sleep for a while —but where? That was the question, where was she going to find a bed?

She sat down on an ant-hill and licked her feet—one pad was quite sore from the hedgehog's prickles. Then she raised her head and listened. Far away was a sound, the crowing of a cock in a farmyard, and nearer a cow mooed softly to its calf. Down on the eastern horizon was a suspicion of grey, above which the purple dome of the heavens began to pale to greenish blue. Dawn was at hand, and the runaway had nowhere to go and knew not what to do. Hungry and tired, she sat and yawned, showing a pink tongue and white teeth as she did so, but whether she thought of home, comfort and safety is another matter. Did she, as she sat there, licking her weary pads, remember her snug bed and the meat that always awaited her when she came in? Did she think of us who had always been her friends?

There is no knowing what Toby thought of, nor whether she had any wish to get back. All that is certain is that she was far too completely

lost to find her way home again. She had got to go forward because she could not go back!

The light in the east was growing stronger, the sky was turning from lemon to gold and rose; cocks were crowing at the farmsteads; owls hooted as they made their way to their resting-places; a grey shape, that bundled by in the dawn, represented Old Brock off to his great earth in the woods; the rabbits began to hop homewards, drifting towards the covert; and from afar came the deep murmur of the rook throng in their rookery as they awakened to the coming day.

Light was coming, the dew-soaked grass began to gleam as if decked in diamonds, and a blackbird awaking fled shrieking from its roosting-place as if roused from a bad dream.

The time had come for the creatures of the night to seek their hiding-places, and for the creatures of the day to come forth.

The tired fox yawned again, yawned and got up—the adventure was not the joy it had been to begin with, but she must go somewhere and do something. She trotted across the meadow, past cattle that were just rising from the places

where they had lain all night, and sheep that stamped their feet, made snuffing noises, and ran together as she passed towards the farther hedge. In this there was a stile. She was going towards it, for it looked like a convenient means of passing through the fence, when a rabbit rushed by her, fleeing in sudden panic, and at the same moment she heard a thump, thump, thumping noise. Human footsteps for certain! Toby had heard them too often before to have any doubt what they were. She stood as if transfixed, one foot held up. At home they were nothing, only the herald of a friend approaching. But out here all was different, all was changed, she herself being a different creature. Twenty-four hours ago she had been Toby the pet fox, now she was a wild vixen! The man, a farm labourer going early to his work, said he saw a small fox that stood and looked at him for a moment. "It was a little vixen, but she was gone in a flash."

The one night in the woods had transformed Toby completely. As the man climbed over the stile strange new feelings rose within her. People in the past had been her friends, but now she

had only one impulse—to flee! And she went, in the same headlong panic that had sent the rabbit scuttling for home. Only the rabbit had gone *home*, and she did not know whither she was bolting. She just galloped off as hard as she could go, not pausing until she found herself among the fern and bushes. Here she pulled up, feeling safe in the tangled undergrowth, and proceeded at a more sedate pace. The ground sloped steeply downwards, there were trees around, and ahead could be heard the gurgle of running water. She had re-entered, at a lower point, the woodland dingle she had left not long since, but now it was lit by the wan light of the rising sun, which sent pale beams through the mists that hung over the valley, to gleam upon the dew-saturated foliage of hawthorn, dog-rose, oak and ash. Its beams caught a squirrel dancing along a bough, showing it as living gold among the dark green leaves; it caught a rabbit sitting washing its face before its burrow, ere popping down the tunnel to hide for the day; its light also shone upon a jay that sat on a twig preening the night's dew from its pink, brown, blue and black plumage; last but not least it shone on

Toby, standing in a clearing among the bracken, fawn-red, burnished by the sunrise to molten gold, looking this way and that, lost, hungry and knowing not where to go.

Poor Toby! She was very, very tired now, and wanted a breakfast worse than ever, but how was she to get one? The rabbits did not wait for her to get near enough to catch one. They had an aggravating way of going on feeding, as if they had no idea there was a fox about, paying no attention to her at all, yet hopping out of reach just as she was about to pounce on them; and she had learnt that in a straight ahead chase they were faster than she was. She licked her nose hungrily as she sniffed here and there, when a fine fat frog jumped out of the grass, and she had it in an instant. Here at last was *something!* And after all a frog was quite a tasty morsel. But the worst of the matter was that there was so little of it—she would have welcomed some creature five or six times the size of a frog.

She walked on through the fern and long grass, past a gorse bush and more fern, and came suddenly on Poaching Puss otherwise Old Puss. Of all the hunters that roamed the night woods

Puss was the most determined, efficient and deadly. By day she sat, so neat and demure in her tabby and white uniform, purring sleepily by a certain kitchen fire, or even the drawing-room fire, but by night she wandered across the country-side. She covered miles on each hunting trip; she sometimes stayed away in the woods for a week or ten days at a time, taking heavy toll of the rabbit population. Once she even had a family of kittens down a rabbit burrow, only bringing them home when nearly half-grown. Spitfire was not of this litter, he had belonged to an earlier family—yes, the truth must out, Poaching Puss was Spitfire's mother. Toby knew her well, had she not chased the cat up a laurel bush the very afternoon she ran away, that is to say only yesterday! If it was but yesterday, it was an epoch ago as regards the fox's outlook on the world. Then she was a well-loved pet, now she was a fox roaming the woods. But as I have said, she knew Poaching Puss in an instant, and Puss as instantly recognized Toby. She had cause to! She glared at the fox, and the latter eyed her, likewise the rabbit lying limp, warm and freshly killed between her paws. From

Poaching Puss glared at Toby

that rabbit came a whiff to assail the fox's nose, a smell of supreme deliciousness to Toby, which turned her hunger to agonized desire.

In less time than it takes to tell Toby had crouched, sprung at the cat, wrested the rabbit from her, and Poaching Puss was going full speed ahead for home.

Oh, how good that rabbit was! The fox fared sumptuously, eating the greater part of the cat's kill, until her middle became rounder and rounder, and she had perforce to pause and lick her lips. She licked her muzzle, she licked her paws, and sitting upon her haunches she regarded what was left of bunny. The rabbit was yet a rabbit, for she had by no means eaten it all, and the question was how to deal with the remainder? But the feeling which she had always had, which every fox and dog has, that extra food must be hidden away, came to her aid—she would bury it. Bury it she did, in the loose soil of a mole-hill, first scratching a hole, then dropping in her booty, and finally pushing the soil back with her nose, though she left a foot sticking out, which betrayed the *cache* to one who passed that way later in the day.

Then, satisfied at last, both as regards hunger and the disposal of the rabbit, Toby turned and stared at a brake of fern. The sun, now well up the eastern sky, shone warmly on the bank, the trees about made the spot a private and a sheltered one, and what need was there to go farther? She crept into the fern, and in the thickest, driest part of it, where the green fronds laced closely overhead, she turned round and round. Round and round she turned, as a dog does before lying down, and having shaped her bed, she curled herself up with her brush over her nose, a very weary little fox, that did not need the lullaby of the gurgling stream to send her into instant sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

TOBY, THE WILD VIXEN

TOBY slept long and soundly in her bed among the fern. As a rule wild animals do not sleep heavily, but rather with " one eye open," ready to take alarm should danger threaten Toby, however, was so tired and had had such a good meal, that she slept without moving until the late afternoon. It was only when the sun had sunk and the evening air began to grow chilly that she uncurled herself, rose from her bed in the bracken, stretched, yawned and stretched again, ere coming forth into the evening world. where the gnats danced on the still air and dor beetles flew by with a heavy hum.

She sniffed at the spot where she had hidden the rabbit, before setting out on an exploring trip. The *cache* was all right, and she looked about her before leaving the place, which was marked by an ant-hill, a very tall thistle and a big stone.

Then Toby went on, to find out more about this wild world to which she now belonged, and sniff here, there and everywhere, and learn about the creatures that lived in it. Her nose, so keen to appreciate a thousand refinements of scent that we can never know of, drew in the news at every breath. Each whiff of evening air was to her what a column of the daily paper is to us: she learnt of the cattle and sheep in the meadows near at hand, she gathered a faint savour of dog scent and man scent (the shepherd had not long since gone his rounds), she recognized the strong smell of rabbit that pervaded the dingle, the nearly faded away scent of Poaching Puss, and a hundred and one other things. Did she, among it all, pick up the odour of her mistress, who had hunted the woods all day long for her? Whether the vixen did or not, I can only say that she slipped off into the covert, to spend many hours in happy, busy exploration. Instead of the lost wandering of the previous night she was now looking about her, with due regard to the place where she had spent the day and where her provisions were hidden—she would need to return to that spot!

Toby spent many hours in busy exploration

In the meantime she roamed up and down the woods, investigating rabbit burrows, nosing in mouse runs, finding beetles and worms (all of which were munched up with relish), and even catching a frog. She came upon Old Brock's residence, that ancestral mansion of the badger clan that lies in the most remote and quietest part of the wood, black yawning tunnels with piles of soil before them, which piles hinted at the far-reaching passages that ran underground. The fox stood and sniffed at the mouth of one, an entrance worn shiny by the passing of many padded feet, and received a whiff of badger odour. She had not known what she was coming to, nor that this was the badger's " sett," but as that smell greeted her sensitive nostrils a memory picture leaped before her, of a great grey beast with a black-and-white striped face down by the woodland brook. The fur of her neck stood up, and with a hissing intake of her breath she backed away. The fox was afraid, and rightly so. Brock is a peace-loving fellow, and interferes with no one, but intrusion he will not tolerate, and had Toby ventured into his sleeping-place there would have been trouble.

The next thrill the vixen had, a pleasurable thrill this time, was when, near the edge of the covert, she came to an isolated thistle. For some reason unknown to herself she turned from her course to sniff at the thistle, and was instantly thrilled through every nerve and fibre, for here was an odour that appealed to her, a smell something like her own, but yet not her own. She had found her first evidence of other foxes, and a dog-fox at that. She had yet to learn that there are certain spots, certain marked places, such as conspicuous tufts of grass, isolated stones, and old thistles, which serve as calling-places for foxes and dogs, and where they glean news of each other. Otters have similar calling-places on the banks of the rivers. Toby had found one used by the various foxes of the neighbourhood, and she sniffed long and delicately. The most recent caller had been a dog-fox, and when he returned that way later in the night he immediately knew there was a new-comer, a vixen, about. This did not worry him, for he was an unmated fox, and so did not feel angry at the smell of a strange vixen on his beat. If he had had a vixen of his own it would have been different. Toby,

brought up among human beings, dogs and cats, had much to learn about the ways of the woods. Had she had a mother, the old vixen would have shown her not only how to hunt and the best hunting grounds, but which foxes lived where, and to whom the different territories belonged. Toby had yet to find it out, she did not even know the fox highways about the countryside, let alone the fox population !

Yes, Toby was handicapped, badly handicapped, by her upbringing, but every moment more and wild impulses welled up within her. Just as she had fled the previous morning at the sight of a man, so now she thrilled with alarm at the mere hint of man-scent on the wind. It was but an old coat, intended for a scarecrow and flung upon a fence, but she sprang away and ran back into the wood.

The fox hunted on through the bushes, trying her luck more than once after a rabbit, but as yet she lacked the skill to catch one. That expert, Poaching Puss, came by, slinking along on velvet feet, to view Toby with great disgust and glide on into the night. But the sight of the cat reminded the fox of her hidden store, and she

made her way back, via the stream where she had a drink, to the place where she had buried the rabbit. She went back purposefully, she was no longer a lost cub running headlong about the countryside, but a fox who knew where she was going, and remembered the way she had come. The rabbit was there all right, so she scratched it up, ate it, cleaning the very bones, and then she retired to bed in the fern, passing the day in its snug depths.

The days went by, Toby making her headquarters in the dingle, always sleeping in the fern, and spending the nights exploring and hunting.

At first she found it hard work to get a living, for beetles and frogs, though all right as extras, as we regard sweets, were not satisfying. Then she had the luck to find part of a dead rabbit the stoat had killed and left. It was getting "high," and the vixen, though she did not mind her meat a trifle "gamy," especially when she had buried it, was no carrion eater; however, after sniffing the find, she decided it was edible, and so got a good meal. Yet it was not long before she was hungry again. She sniffed about

She had the luck to find a dead rabbit

in the hope of getting another rabbit from Poaching Puss, but in vain; she caught two or three mice; and then, hunger urging her, she tried very hard and caught a rabbit for herself. It was only a small one, a young and innocent rabbit that had been sitting outside its home burrow, and which the fox took by surprise, grabbing it before it knew danger was at hand. It made her a breakfast, if not a good one, and encouraged her to try again, with next time even better results.

Toby was now a self-supporting fox, and not only self-supporting but fast becoming a beautiful young vixen. That tail which once had been no thicker than that of a rat was now a real brush, thick and full with a white tag (as remarked earlier in this story, the tag is no sign of either age or sex, and some vixens have fine tags); her coat, of various mingled shades of red and brown, gleamed golden in the sunlight; and her face, with its delicately pointed muzzle, gazed on her world of dingle and wood with an expression of inquisitive mischievous understanding.

So Toby the vixen grew and flourished, living alone, save for the foxes she met casually on her

wanderings, such as her neighbour the fine dog-fox who owned the territory around. The district was divided into areas hunted by different foxes, and they did not trespass on one another's ground if they could help it. Toby had by now established some right to what she regarded as her wood, but her beat did not extend very far. Rabbits being plentiful, it was big enough for her needs, and she lived well. So far she had sought no other prey, and hens were outside her experience. A mother would have taken her round the farm-steads and shown her how to raid them for fowls left out of the pens, but without such example she dare not adventure.

Exploration taught our fox a good deal about the fox ways over ditch and dingle, through fence and fern. She knew now where the crossing-places were over the different streams, the "smeuses" in the hedges, and the best way from wood to wood. She put that knowledge to good account one autumn morning when, having retired to her lair to sleep off a supper of rabbit, she was roused by strange noises, such as she had never heard before—the clattering of horses' feet on a distant road, men's voices, the

Toby's neighbour, the fine dog-fox

thud of hoofs on turf, the voices getting nearer, the "Leu in ! Leu over !" of the huntsman cheering hounds into covert, a burst of hound voices, the hound music swelling until wood and dingle echoed, the too-toot ! of the horn, and Toby was up and off. With the deafening clamour of the pack in her ears—hounds were on the line of the dog-fox, but he was already far away—the vixen ran up the bank. In the field stood a man on horseback, who saw her, cracked his whip and tried to drive her back, for this was cub-hunting, when foxes are not hunted in the open, but only in the woods. He shouted, but it was in vain. Toby laid back her ears and raced up a fence side. What was a man compared with the noise in the woods ?

It had given her a fright, a great fright indeed, but she collected her wits when she found herself in the next meadow, and cantered off quite deliberately to the neighbouring wood.

It was days before the vixen ventured home, for that dingle *was* "home" to her now, and even then she could still trace horrid odours of dogs, horses and men ; so much so that she shifted her quarters into the wood, to a very

quiet retired spot near the big badger "sett," so quiet, so remote, that sometimes she ventured to stretch her legs in the early afternoon, when all the woodland busybodies cried out about it, jays chattering and scolding her, blackbirds shrieking hysterically and even the cock pheasants crying "ker-ker!"

So the autumn days passed, the fox living a happy and peaceful, if lonely, life. She slept alone, she hunted alone, and had no one even to play with. There was the big dog-fox, who had come home again soon after that disturbance by the hounds, but they met very seldom—she did not even know where he dwelt! It was very, very lonely, and it got worse as the autumn leaves began to fall. The woods were wet, the undergrowth sodden, the wet sad leaves fell and fell, and then when they had all fallen, when winter had the woods in its grip, and everything was bare and barren, it was worse still, it was enough to make anyone shriek aloud. The vixen did so, she lifted up her voice in a piteous cry!

Listening on the doorstep that evening, listening to the different voices of the night, I heard the cry, a gasping, strangled scream that echoed

through the woods, and knew the eerie sound for what it was, the call of a lonely vixen. It rose again, and after a pause yet again, so piteous and pitiful, surely it would bring a reply? It did. Afar off came a muffled yap, three short gruff barks—the reply of a dog-fox—there was another lonely fox in the country-side.

CHAPTER TEN

THE STORY TOLD BY THE SNOW

THROUGH the darkness of the night came once more that piteous cry, that muffled, strangled shriek, that most miserable of all the calls of the wild creatures, and I said to myself, "A lonely vixen. Is it Toby calling for a mate?"

Straining my ears, I listened carefully and heard, not one, but several replies. The fox already mentioned barked again, a second answered in the opposite direction, a third, very faint and distant, from a wood a mile away, and a fourth from the fields on my right. "Yap! yap! yap!" came their calls, three barks, rarely four, and then a pause.

Apart from the fact that a fox's bark is *not* like that of a dog, you can always tell them apart by the fact that a dog goes on barking, but a fox just gives two or three gruff yaps and then stops.

I could hear one fox coming nearer, each time he barked the sound was closer, and I judged that he was travelling by a certain fox path that led past our pools and away to the wood. But there was something else to listen to, for where, on my left, the covert loomed as a shapeless black mass in the grey of the night, arose another bark, the voice that first answered the vixen's cry. She replied to it, just a strangled scream. He yapped once, and silence descended.

I listened and listened, to owls hooting, a lone peewit wailing like a lost soul in the darkness (why cannot lapwing sleep better at night?), and finally to a badger yelling as only a badger can, but never a fox lifted its voice again. The badger, I could tell, was coming through the wood, and raising a fiendish din as it did so. When Old Brock really gets excited and wants to let his neighbours know it he can make an appalling noise, far worse than that of Madame Vixen, and what is more he keeps it up. Perhaps it was the noise he made which eclipsed Toby's efforts and put her to shame; but I think the facts were that she had got what she wanted, that her appeal had received such a prompt answer

that she had no need to cry again. Her neighbour, that fine dog-fox, had, I think, been at hand, merely waiting for permission to join her. He had doubtless been just as lonely as she, just as badly in need of a mate, and it took but her call to bring him hurrying to her side.

Foxes are faithful, devoted creatures, and the couples do not part company if they can help it. This is why good and truly mated pairs of the North-American black ("silver") fox are so valuable to those who own farms where foxes are bred for fur purposes. By the way, the "silver" or black fox differs only in colour and as regards a better coat from the red fox of Europe. Its manners and ways are the same.

We must picture Toby and the big red fox, neither lonely any longer, wandering up and down the woods, so happy to be together, so contented with the world, and so joyful that they had no ears for shrieking badgers nor eyes for ought but each other.

Yet it was not until the snow came that I learnt how truly inseparable they were.

It had snowed all the previous day and part of the night, a fine steady snow, that had come

floating down like powder, muffling the country-side in a blanket of white, so that it was a transfigured world upon which the sun rose. The sunrise hues spread across the blue-green dome of the heavens, a golden radiance gleaming low down in the eastern sky, while a few pearly flakes of cloud hanging overhead, all that was left of the sombre snow-clouds, caught the coming sunlight and blushed a coppery hue. Below, the snowy landscape seemed to be painted in the most delicate tones of blue, the azure shadows serving to dimly indicate familiar contours buried beneath this all-enveloping mantle of snow.

With the snow had come peace, a silence and stillness, as if the country-side was holding its breath, and feared to move lest it should disturb the silver burden of the trees. Every branch, nay, every twig, was tricked out with white; white that shone and glittered in the sunlight; but not a thing stirred; all was still — not even a flake of snow fell from the burdened boughs.

The wild creatures were literally afraid to move abroad, rabbits staying in their holes, birds skulking under the bushes, squirrels sleeping in

their " dreys," and the foxes likewise lying up for the time being.

Red Fox had found Toby better quarters than her old lair in the bracken (which was now dead and down-trodden), or the bushes by the badger's " sett, " namely a snug earth in the middle of the wood—the next morning the snow told me how they had left the burrow over-night to stare amazed at the transfigured world. Too hungry to stay any longer below ground, the foxes had had to come forth. Red Fox was the bolder of the two, he had seen snow before, but to Toby this white world was terrifyingly strange. She shrank back into the tunnel, but her mate had gone forth and she was hungry, so she followed him because she must. The world was not only strange and white, but it was cold, and the yielding stuff let her feet in at every step. However, her inquiring spirit came to her rescue, and Toby, after sniffing about her, hurried after Red Fox. We must picture them, two red shapes, or rather black ones under the light of the moon, gliding across the snows, that clad woods and fields alike.

It was in the meadow next day that I picked

up this trail. Here, having got over their fright of the previous day, the rabbits had come to play in the snow, its surface being laced with a criss-cross pattern of their tracks, showing how they had hopped to and fro, scratching here, hopping there, and had then galloped off to the wood.

Among the trails upon the snow were some where the rabbits had been going very fast, where they had evidently made for home, racing over the snow in flying bounds. Near these foot-marks I found other prints, small dog-like ones, namely those of a fox. No doubt it was from the fox that the rabbits had fled in such alarm. Looking closely at the fox trail, some interesting details became apparent—it was made by two foxes stepping one behind the other, the last stepping almost in the footsteps of the first. I followed the trail, which led down the slope towards the covert ahead, and noted as I did so that one of the foxes had turned aside from the direct route to call at a mole-hill. It was the one that left the biggest footprints! Red Fox, in fact, and I could picture him sniffing at it in the moonlight, to gather such news as was to be had, ere gliding on after Toby across the white waste,

the two being silhouetted by the moonlight as dark shapes upon the snow.

I followed that trail by brakes and through briers, across a deep dingle, past the place where the gamekeeper fed the pheasants, onwards through the wood and at last out into the fields again. Save for one or two deviations of a yard or so, the two sets of prints were inseparable. Here and there the big fox veered to look at something, Toby's padmarks then being left by themselves; but for the greater part of the way they were super-imposed on those of her mate, showing how faithfully she had followed him through the night, walking literally in his footsteps.

Still I followed their tracks, which took me across the middle of a big field, where the foxes had paused to investigate a newly-raised mole-hill, the earth of which showed red and raw on the purity of the snow—Toby always was inquisitive! —to a certain well-known passage, or "smeuse" in the next fence. It was a convenient way beloved of foxes, rabbits and hares. The badgers used the gateways, but these were despised by the fox clan, which preferred to avoid the works of man

Our pair, Toby and her mate, with the latter in the van, had then crossed a plough-ground, passing close to a sleeping covey of partridges, whose " squat " was plainly outlined in the snow, but in the still night had failed to catch their scent, though they had evidently picked up that of a field-mouse tunnelling beneath the snow, for here was where they had paused, smelt and listened, and one of them, namely Toby, had pounced on the mouse. The quarry, if small, was no doubt welcome, for the cold night air would have made anything hungry, let alone a keen young vixen and a handsome dog-fox.

On and on went the trail, bearing now towards a farmstead. Hunting had hitherto been poor, and a mouse was scanty fare between two foxes —had the dog-fox some new idea? It looked like it! Yes, the trail led straight to the farmyard, that very farmyard where the cocks and hens had once followed Toby the cub in a clucking throng. Did the vixen remember it as she followed her mate through a gap in the fence and towards the haystacks? Who knows what she thought about when she found herself so near the scene of her cubhood. The trail simply showed how

both foxes had crept cautiously towards the fowl-house, always the dog-fox leading and the vixen following. Around it the footprints were obliterated by the later ones of cocks, hens and farmyard creatures, but undoubtedly the foxes had sniffed about the building to find the door firmly shut and all the hens safe inside.

On the farther side of the rickyard I found their footprints once more, retreating, doubtless still very hungry, towards the covert. Yet after all, they had not gone home supperless, for just outside the rickyard, in the orchard, where there was a large pile of firewood, were left abundant signs that luck had favoured them at last. A silly old hen, instead of going to bed with her friends in the fowl-pen, had stayed out and roosted on the wood-pile. She would not do so a second time. There were feathers on the snow, and at the end of the orchard I found all that was left of her—just the "wings and giblets," no more!

The two foxes had shared her, and when they had finished there was nothing left to bury. Then they went back to the wood, evidently in a different humour to that in which they had left it, for on the way they indulged in a game, the snow showing

On and on went the trail

plainly how they had tumbled and rolled, danced about and rolled again, the snow retaining even the impression of their fur as they did so—what fun they must have had playing under the moon !

Still I followed their trail, not directly to the heart of the woods, but first to some big rabbit holes, into which Toby had peeped and poked. At the mouth of each were her neat little foot-prints—had she been looking ahead and thinking of a day when she might want a nursery for cubs of her own ? Be that as it may, she had examined them all, ere trotting after her lord and master, and with him making her way home to the earth in which they were living.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WERE THEY TOBY'S CUBS?

THE betraying snow melted and thawed, vanishing in turbid flood and horrid slush, and with it vanished the footprint record written on its fair surface, only chance padmarks in muddy places being left to tell what the foxes were doing. They remained near; hens that mistakenly stayed out at night seldom lived to see the error of their ways, and the rabbit-catcher grumbled bitterly at the losses he had to suffer. Rabbits were torn from his snares, not by ones and twos, but by half-dozens in a night. If indeed my putting of "two and two together" had brought me to the correct conclusion, if indeed the vixen of the neat small footsteps was Toby my fox-cub, then by now there was nothing left to teach her of woodcraft and hunting lore, either that of hunting or being hunted.

The hounds came, the sound of hound music

crashed through the woods, Red Fox departed, not in headlong panic, but in the leisured considered manner of a wise old fox, with the sound of the huntsman's horn blowing hounds out of covert in his ears, and the "Forrad, forrad-away!" echoing down the wind. Scent was not too good, and he ran down wind. Hounds were soon at fault. They recovered the line, only to lose it; and Red Fox, making a wide detour, worked his way home again. A farm workman saw him return in the twilight, rather dirty, somewhat stiff, slinking down a hedgerow to the wood—Toby had never left the covert.

* * * * *

Time passed, April days came and went, and May arrived, and that too had almost given place to June when on a warm sunny afternoon I lay watching from a distance through field-glasses an ancient hedgebank. Once it was a good fence, but now it was high and old, a tangle of unkempt hawthorn, fantastically twisted stems, thick briers and rose bushes. Its time-worn bank was riddled with holes, ancient rabbit burrows tunnelled it in all directions, and one of these ancestral mansions

had been turned to good account. It was occupied by something more lively than rabbits. It had been enlarged and extended until it made an excellent nursery for a promising family. Where the bank rose high and steep, and the hawthorn roots, twisted like ropes, peeped through the red soil, there were the dark entrance holes; and it was those holes on which my glasses were focused, as I lay watching and waiting.

Something sandy-coloured slipped through the tangled greenery of the fence, a shape glided across a dark shadowy gap between the stems, and I caught my breath and murmured to myself, "A cub!"

It must have slipped out by some backdoor, as had done another, for the blackbirds farther up the hedge raised their voices, breaking into a volley of abuse, shrieking and chattering in frantic annoyance, which could only mean one thing, a cub playing about. A whitethroat too began to scold in a fussy cross little voice from its hiding-place in a nettle-bed, and then a cub came into plain view, gliding forth from the shadowy bottom of the hedge.

The cub sat down and looked about him,

not a hair or a whisker quivering, not even his nose twitching, and I held my breath lest he should hear me breathe even at my distant view-point. His sandy jacket showed against the greenery, as did his keen, alert little face, delicate muzzle and pricked ears; so like, so exactly like Toby at the same age! Was he indeed Toby's cub? I can only say he was exactly like her. Wild beauty and innocent inquisitive youth were personified in turn, as he stood there, looking forth at the wide world with his inquiring amber eyes; at the world of green fields dotted with buttercups and daisies, and the long lines of the old gone-wild hedges, whose tall hawthorns were so white with blossom that against the dark background of the woods they looked as if laden with snow. The scent of the may hung heavy on the air, flies hummed drowsily, and rabbits feeding by the fence, regardless of the cub, flicked their ears lazily. The cub regarded one of them with a steady stare, then rose, stepped very gently forward, and began to stalk it. But the rabbit, still flicking a lazy ear, hopped off. The cub made a dash, the rabbit bolted, and the two rushed in a headlong scamper down the hedge-side, the

quarry, with a bob of its white tail, disappearing into the bushes, while a disappointed little fox trotted back to the earth. It was just such a performance as that of Toby chasing the cats into the shrubs. Only play and mischief.

For a moment the cub stood against the dark entrance to the burrow, his slender immature form showing up against it, and the greenery of the hedge making his sandy coat redder by contrast—next moment he was gone.

Was he Toby's son, was it Toby's family in the earth? Surely that litter of cubs belonged to my Toby! At any rate, the little fellow was so exactly like her that I could have believed it was Toby herself returned to the days of her cubhood.

Was he Toby's son?

POSTSCRIPT

I MUST add a final paragraph on foxes as pets. If you can do as I did, let your cub run about the garden, and let her run away when she feels the call of the wild, then by all means try a fox as a pet; but don't, oh! don't, make your pet a miserable captive tied to a kennel, or shut it up in some narrow pen—for a fox of all creatures, that is the worst of fates. Solitary confinement is awful enough for any animal, but what must it be for a creature which should be roaming hill and dale!

Then just a word or two about the illustrations. The photographs that illustrate Toby's adventures after she left me, *i.e.* those in which she appears herself, were taken *before* she ran away; but to illustrate the dog-fox I have used a picture of an old friend, namely Tommy, a fox who was with me years before I had Toby, and whose portrait fitted Red Fox to perfection.

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